

**Dominik Sackmann, trans. Jeremy Coleman**

“A Triumph of Spirit over Matter”: Conjectures about Johann Sebastian Bach’s *Sei Solo a Violino senza Basso accompagnato* (BWV 1001-1006)

Foreword

I recorded the Solo Sonatas and Partitas in July and September 2004. Among the many performances I gave in preparation for the recording were three short concerts in the University of Music in Dresden, Germany, on June 23rd 2004. Each concert featured one sonata and one partita, the three concerts presenting all six works in order. In the extended intermissions between the concerts a symposium took place, organized by Ludger Remy, then Professor of Early Music at the University. The main speaker at the symposium was Dominik Sackmann. His subject – Thoughts on the Purpose behind the Composition of the *Sei Solo a Violino*, and on their Environment – became the basis of the monograph presented here. It consists of a compact survey of the current state of musicological research into Bach’s violin solos, as well as some fascinating and important discussion of the possible dating of their composition. The monograph was originally published in German by Carus-Verlag, who have kindly allowed this English language version.

John Holloway

I. Bach’s *Sei Solo a Violino senza Basso accompagnato*

Johann Sebastian Bach is generally regarded as a composer of sacred music – cantatas, passions and masses – and as the creator of numerous works for keyboard instruments, whether for organ or harpsichord. Bach’s instrumental ensemble music is no less often heard in concerts and radio broadcasts, but in terms of sheer quantity, it lags significantly behind the vocally dominated ensemble music and solo keyboard music. The six movement-cycles for violin and for ’cello respectively are shining examples of his instrumental music for small forces. However, whether the actual purpose of these twelve works justifies their classification among Bach’s chamber music, for example in the *Neuen Bach-Ausgabe* (*New Bach Edition*), remains an open question. At any rate, for all their inner variety and complexity, such monological and solo-virtuoso forms of performance stand in marked contrast to an ideal of chamber music focused on partnership and dialogue.<sup>1</sup> The two collections of six works probably testify to a third, and for the composer himself no less important, area of his professional activity: as well as being a cantor, an organist,<sup>2</sup> and a teacher of prospective organists, Johann Sebastian Bach was a violinist and ensemble leader.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Adolf Nowak, “Bachs Werke für Violine allein – ihre Rezeption durch Aufführung, Theorie und Komposition”, in Hermann Danuser and Friedhelm Krummacher, eds., *Rezeptionsästhetik und Rezeptionsgeschichte in der Musikwissenschaft*, Publikationen der Hochschule für Musik und Theater Hanover 3, ed. Richard Jakoby (Laaber, 1991), 223.

2 The importance of this area of activity for Bach’s life and self-image has been explored in various publications by Siegbert Rampe, most recently in “Klavier oder Orgelwerke? Zur Sozialgeschichte der Tastenmusik 1685-

Without immediately going into the dating of the Sonatas and Partitas for Violin BWV 1001-1006 as well as the Suites for 'Cello BWV 1007-1012, it may be noted that the two work cycles fit into a larger series of work collections, among them the *English Suites* (1717; BWV 806-811), the *French Suites* (up to 1724; BWV 812-817), the *Brandenburg Concertos* (1721; BWV 1046-1051), the *Well-Tempered Clavier Book 1* (1722; BWV 846-869), the *Auffrichtige Anleitung* (Inventions and Sinfonias, 1723; BWV 772-801), even the *Orgelbüchlein* (BWV 599-644), begun in Weimar but not completed until Bach's stay in Cöthen.

### 1. Structure and Cyclic Form of the *Sei Solo*

The *Sei Solo a Violino senza Basso accompagnato* are divided into three movement-cycles called Sonatas and three called Partitas, each *Sonata* being followed by a Partita.

<b>Sonata 1 in G minor</b> <b>BWV 1001</b> Adagio Fuga <sup>1</sup> Siciliana Presto	<b>Sonata 2<sup>2</sup> in A minor</b> <b>BWV 1003</b> Grave Fuga Andante Allegro	<b>Sonata 3 in C major</b> <b>BWV 1005</b> Adagio <sup>3</sup> Fuga Largo Allegro assai
<b>Partita 1 in B minor</b> <b>BWV 1002</b> Allemanda + Double Corrente + Double Sarabande + Double Tempo di Borea + Double	<b>Partita 2 in D minor</b> <b>BWV 1004</b> Allemanda Corrente Sarabanda Gigue Ciaccona	<b>Partita 3<sup>4</sup> in E major</b> <b>BWV 1006</b> Preludio <sup>5</sup> Loure Gavotte en Rondeau Menuet I + II Bourrée Gigue

Bach's alternative versions from later periods:

<sup>1</sup> Fugue for lute in G minor BWV 1000, or for organ in D minor BWV 539.

<sup>2</sup> Partita for keyboard in D minor BWV 964.

<sup>3</sup> Adagio for keyboard in G major BWV 968.

<sup>4</sup> Version for lute or harp BWV 1006a.

<sup>5</sup> Sinfonia for organ, strings (trumpets) and basso continuo BWV 120/4 (BWV 120a/3) or BWV29/1.

1750", in Siegbert Rampe, ed., *Bachs Klavier- und Orgelwerke*, Vol. 1 (of 2): *Das Bach-Handbuch*, Vol. 4/1, eds. Reinmar Emans, Sven Hiemke and Klaus Hofmann (Laaber, 2007), 33-65.

<sup>3</sup> Georg von Dadelsen, "Bach, der Violinist: Anmerkungen zu den Soli für Violine und für Violoncello", in Andreas Glöckner, ed., *Johann Sebastian Bach: Schaffenskonzepktion, Werkidee, Textbezug: Bericht über die Wissenschaftliche Konferenz zum VI. Internationalen Bachfest der DDF in Verbindung mit dem 64. Bachfest der neuen Bachgesellschaft, Leipzig, 11./12. September 1989*, published in *Beiträge zur Bachforschung* 9/10 (Leipzig, 1991), 70-76; Siegbert Rampe and Dominik Sackmann, *Bachs Orchestermusik: Entstehung, Klangwelt, Interpretation* (Kassel, 2000), 23-30.

With the sequence of movements slow – fast – slow – fast, the fugal second movement and a “moto perpetuo” finale, these Sonatas fall into the more precise category “Sonata da chiesa”. The first movements of the Sonatas combine an opening, improvisatory gesture with a mode of construction based on the pattern of contemporary slow movements, as may be familiar from the Violin Sonatas op. 5 by Arcangelo Corelli.<sup>4</sup> The second movements are titled “Fuga” and, in their clear structure and marked alternation of thematic expositions and episodes, bear a closer resemblance to some of Bach’s own organ fugues of the Weimar period than to the imitative movements of Italian violin sonatas from around 1700. Bach clearly considered these two introductory movements as a pair: in the autograph manuscript he wrote the instruction “volti subito” at the end of the G-minor “Adagio” and of the A-minor “Grave”, and the time signature of the Fugue on the last stave of the A-minor “Grave” and of the C-major “Adagio”.

The third movements are *cantabile* character pieces in a moderate tempo (*Siciliana*, *Andante* or *Largo*) and in a key other than the home key of the sonata. The fast finales, defined by a developmental “unitary progression” in fast tempo (*Presto*, *Allegro* or *Allegro assai*), provide a certain counterweight to the second-movement fugues. Even in Bach’s notation there is a closer relationship between the last two movements: either the finale begins on the same system or after a “volti subito” marking.<sup>5</sup>

The generic name Partita has led to various interpretations. For one, it may be viewed as a work consisting of a series of dances, as in the Italian “Sonata da camera”. Such movement-cycles are thus distinguished from the “Sonata da chiesa”, which typify the works designated Sonata within the *Sei Solo*. On the other hand, “Partia” (or, to use the more common designation, “Partita”) may be understood as a synonym for the French concept of the “Suite”, as had already been encountered in earlier violin music such as that of Johann Paul von Westhoff (1656-1705). In fact, “Partia” or “Partita” was the overarching concept for many different works in the seventeenth century, whether cycles of dance movements, a sequence of variations or a series of chorale preludes for organ on the same *cantus firmus* (“Choralpartiten”), while the concept of the “Suite” gradually asserted itself in Germany beginning in the eighteenth century as part of the wider reception of French music.<sup>6</sup> Bach opted for the better-established term “Partita” over the more modern term “Suite”, thereby leaving open all possibilities in terms of stylistic reference.

At their core, Partitas consist of a series of dance movements. However, Bach chose a different “type” for each of his Partitas for solo violin. In the first Partita, each of the four

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4 Frederick Neumann, “Some Performance Problems of Bach’s Unaccompanied Violin and Cello Works”, in Mary Ann Parker, ed., *Eighteenth-Century Music in Theory and Practice: Essays in Honor of Alfred Mann* (Stuyvesant, 1994), 23; Dominik Sackmann, *Bach und Corelli: Studien zu Bachs Rezeption von Corellis Violinsonaten op. 5 unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der “Passaggio-Organchoräle” und der langsamen Konzertsätze*, Musikwissenschaftliche Schriften 36 (Munich and Salzburg, 2000), 135.

5 Günther Hausswald, “Zur Stilistik von Johann Sebastian Bachs Sonaten und Partiten für Violine allein”, in *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 14 (1957), 309.

6 Siegbert Rampe, “Suiten und Klavierübung“, in Konrad Küster, ed., *Bach Handbuch* (Kassel, 1999), 749.

movement types, which approximate the main movements of a keyboard suite, is juxtaposed with a “Double”, identical in bar length and harmonic progression but richly varied in figuration. This method will be familiar from the keyboard suites of Louis Couperin (1626-1661) in particular. The second Partita places a series of movements consisting of the four main movements of the keyboard suite against a Chaconne movement, which takes almost as long in performance as the rest of the Partita. The Ciaccona of the second Partita essentially consists of 32 *passaggi*, or variously embellished iterations, of an eight-bar bass melody (and a harmonic progression), changing to the major mode in statements 17 to 26.<sup>7</sup> The third Partita combines an exuberant Preludio – in the Italian *concertante* style, as the name already suggests – with movements that previously belonged to the early eighteenth-century orchestral suite. Yet here, for the first time, a Gigue forms the closing movement, whereas for the finale of the first Partita this conventional dance had been replaced by a *Tempo di Borea*, i.e. a Bourée.

Unlike the later Partitas for keyboard (BWV 825-830), the *Sei Solo* were not designed as a succession of movement-cycles with each movement continually building on the previous one. Only the scope of the Fugues shows a definite increase from one Sonata to the next. The fact that these three single movements have a stronger relationship to one another may suggest that the themes of the three Fugues are also interconnected.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, the progressive “detachment from the Suite norm” (“Loslösung von der Suitennorm”) from one Partita to the next was a factor in determining the sequence of the three Partitas.<sup>9</sup>

If one compares the two series of three Sonatas and three Partitas from a musical point of view, the Sonatas turn out to be cycles of four movements each tending towards unity, whereas the Partitas with their four (times two), five or six movements tend towards increasing variety.

The structural arrangement of three Sonatas and three Partitas in alternation has provoked various interpretations, at the centre of which has been the relationship between the fundamental tones of the respective six works:<sup>10</sup>

- The fundamental tones G, B, A, D, C, E form the hexachord G, A, B, C, D, E. If one follows the keys within the hexachord in ascending order, then two Sonatas (G minor, A minor) are followed by a Partita (B minor) and a Sonata (C) is followed by two Partitas (D minor, E).

- The fundamental tones result in two interlocking triads, one in major and one in minor:

$$\begin{array}{ccc} G - B - & & D \\ & A & - C - E \end{array}$$

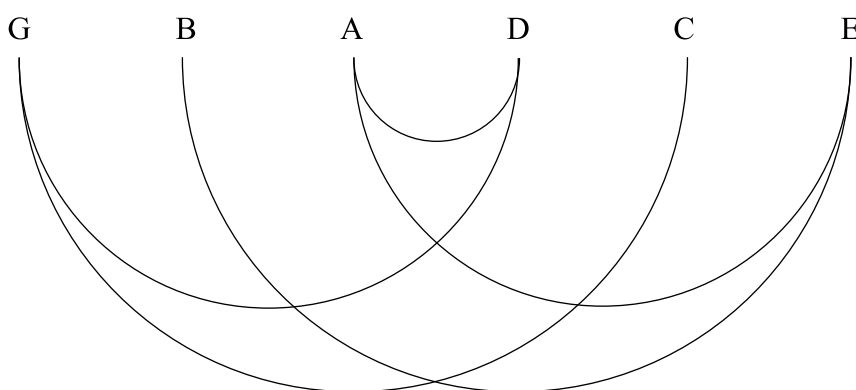
7 There is some imprecision in the number due to the fact that the sixteenth statement (from b. 121) is extended by four bars while the twenty-first (from b. 165) is shortened by four bars (cf. p. 17).

8 Jan Reichow, “Struktur und Praxis. Beobachtungen an einem Adagio der Sonaten für Violine Solo von Johann Sebastian Bach (BWV 1001, g-moll)“, in Rüdiger Schumacher, ed., *Von der Vielfalt musikalischer Kultur: Festschrift für Josef Kuckertz zur Vollendung des 60. Lebensjahres* (Anif, 1992), 403.

9 Rudolf Eller, “Serie und Zyklus in Bachs Instrumentalsammlungen“, in Martin Geck, ed., *Bach-Interpretationen* (Göttingen, 1969), 133.

10 Eller, 133; Reinhard Goebel, “Bachs geschichtlicher Ort. Werke für Solovioline bis Johann Sebastian Bach“, in Reinhard Seiffert, ed., *J. S. Bach, Sei Solo: Sechs Sonaten und Partiten für Violine: Interpretation, Aufführungspraxis, Authentizität* ([place of publication not given], 1991), 131; Reichow (see n. 8), 403.

- The series of the fundamental tones can also be read as a symmetrical series of intervals: ascending major third – descending second – fourth – descending second – ascending major third. Or, in other words, the second half is the transposed retrograde of the first. If one considers the three Sonatas and the three Partitas as groups, their fundamental tones also form symmetrical intervallic relationships: G minor – A minor – C and B minor – D minor – E.
- If one takes the first and the third fundamental tones in each half of the cycle, there appears the four open strings of the violin in a crisscrossed arrangement: G – A – D – E.
- If one connects the six notes in pairs, this also results in a symmetrical pattern:



## 2. The Sources of the *Sei Solo*

More than almost any other work in the history of music, the extant early manuscript sources of the Violin Solos and their significance for compositional as well as specialist technical features have been the subject of continuous debate for over a hundred years, and indeed have remained a fiercely contested area with new arguments and perspectives. The relevant documents may be briefly described as follows.

The main source is Johann Sebastian Bach's autograph fair copy of the Six Sonatas and Partitas with the title *Sei Solo. | a | Violino | senza | Basso | accompagnato. | Libro Primo. | da | Joh: Seb: Bach. | a[nn]o. 1720.*<sup>11</sup> which is held in the Berlin State Library (SBB [Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin] Mus. ms. Bach P 967).

In spring 1917, the Berlin Royal Library acquired the autograph manuscript from the estate of the Thomaskantor and editor of Bach's works, Wilhelm Rust (1822-1892). Rust probably acquired it around 1890 from an unknown private owner. The one clue of a previous owner may be found on the title page of this source: "Louisa Bach | Bückeburg | 1842". The latter